Ammianus Marcellinus

(c. 330 – c. 400)

BRIEFING

Ammianus Marcellinus, occasionally anglicized as Ammian (Greek: Αμμιανός Μαρκελλίνος; born c. 330, died c. 391 – 400), was a Greek and Roman soldier and historian who wrote the penultimate major historical account surviving from antiquity (preceding Procopius). Written in Latin and known as the *Res gestae*, his work chronicled the history of Rome from the accession of Emperor Nerva in 96 to the death of Valens at the Battle of Adrianople in 378. Only the sections covering the period 353 to 378 survive.

BIOGRAPHY

Ammianus was born in the East Mediterranean, possibly in Syria or Phoenicia, around 330, into a noble family of Greek origin. Since he calls himself *Graecus* (lit. Greek), he was most likely born in a Greek-speaking area of the empire. His native language was Greek, but he also knew Latin. The surviving books of his history cover the years 353 to 378.

Ammianus began his career as a military officer in the Praetorian Guard, where he gained firsthand experience in various military campaigns. He served as an officer in the army of the emperors Constantius II and Julian. He served in Gaul (Julian) and in the east (twice for Constantius, once under Julian). He professes to have been "a former soldier and a Greek" (*miles quondam et graecus*), and his enrollment among the elite *protectors domestic* (household guards) shows that he was of the middle class or higher birth. Consensus is that Ammianus probably came from a curial family, but it is also possible that he was the son of a *comes Orientis* of the same family name. He entered the army at an early age, when Constantius II was emperor of the East, and was sent to serve under Ursicinus, governor of Nisibis in Mesopotamia, and *magister militum*. Ammianus campaigned in the East twice under Ursicinus.

He traveled with Ursicinus to Italy in an expedition against Silvanus, an officer who had proclaimed himself emperor in Gaul. Ursicinus ended the threat by having Silvanus assassinated, then stayed in the region to help install Julian as Caesar of Gaul, Spain, and Britain. Ammianus probably met Julian for the first time while serving on Ursicinus' staff in Gaul.

In 359, Constantius sent Ursicinus back to the east to help in the defense against a Persian invasion led by King Shapur II himself. Ammianus returned with his commander to the East and again served Ursicinus as a staff officer. Ursicinus, although he was the more experienced commander, was placed under the command of Sabinianus, the *Magister Peditum* of the east. The two did not get along, resulting in a lack of cooperation between the Limitanei (border regiments) of Mesopotamia and Osrhoene under Ursicinus' command and the *comitatus* (field army) of Sabinianus. While on a mission near Nisibis, Ammianus spotted a Persian patrol which was about to try and capture Ursicinus, and warned his commander in time. In an attempt to locate the Persian Royal Army, Ursicinus sent Ammianus to Jovinianus, the semi-independent governor of Corduene, and a friend of Ursicinus. Ammianus successfully located the Persian main body and reported his findings to Ursicinus.

After his mission in Corduene, Ammianus left the headquarters at Amida in the retinue of Ursinicus, who was on a mission to make sure the bridges across the Euphrates were demolished. They were attacked by the Persian vanguard, who had made a night march in an attempt to catch the Romans at Amida unprepared. After a protracted cavalry battle, the Romans were scattered; Ursicinus evaded capture and fled to Melitene, while Ammianus made a difficult journey back to Amida with a wounded comrade. The Persians besieged and eventually sacked Amida, and Ammianus barely escaped with his life.

THE CRETAN EARTHQUAKE

The 365 Crete earthquake occurred at about sunrise on 21 July 365 in the Eastern Mediterranean, with an assumed epicentre near Crete. Geologists today estimate the undersea earthquake to have been a moment magnitude 8.5 or higher. It caused widespread destruction in the central and southern Diocese of Macedonia (modern Greece), Africa Proconsularis (northern Libya), Egypt, Cyprus, Sicily, and Hispania (Spain). On Crete, nearly all towns were destroyed.

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami which devastated the southern and eastern coasts of the Mediterranean, particularly Libya, Alexandria, and the Nile Delta, killing thousands and hurling ships 3 km (1.9 mi) inland. The quake left a deep impression on the late antique mind, and numerous writers of the time referred to the event in their works.

Recent (2001) geological studies view the 365 Crete earthquake in connection with a clustering of major seismic activity in the Eastern Mediterranean between the fourth and sixth centuries which may have reflected a reactivation of all major plate boundaries in the region. The earthquake is thought to be responsible for an uplift of nine metres (30 feet) of the island of Crete, which is estimated to correspond to a seismic moment of 1×1022 N·m (7.4×1021 lbf·ft), or 8.6 on the moment magnitude scale. An earthquake of such a magnitude exceeds all modern ones known to have affected the region.

Carbon dating shows that corals on the coast of Crete were lifted ten metres (33 feet) and clear of the water in one massive push. This indicates that the tsunami of 365 was generated by an earthquake in a steep fault in the Hellenic Trench near Crete. Scientists estimate that such a large uplift is likely to occur only once in 5,000 years; however, the other segments of the fault could slip on a similar scale—and this could happen every 800 years or so. It is uncertain whether "one of the contiguous patches might slip in the future."

Sedimentation increased dramatically in some areas of the Mediterranean Sea, while other areas had coastal sediments moved to deep waters.

Historians continue to debate whether ancient sources refer to a single catastrophic earthquake in 365, or whether they represent a historical amalgamation of a number of earthquakes occurring between 350 and 450. The interpretation of the surviving literary evidence is complicated by the tendency of late antique writers to describe natural disasters as divine responses or warnings to political and religious events. In particular, the virulent antagonism between rising Christianity and paganism at the time led contemporary writers to distort the evidence. Thus, the Sophist Libanius and the church historian Sozomenus appear to conflate the great earthquake of 365 with other lesser ones to present it as either divine sorrow or wrath—depending on their viewpoint—for the death of Emperor Julian, who had tried to restore the pagan religion two years earlier.

On the whole, however, the relatively numerous references to earthquakes in a time which is otherwise characterized by a paucity of historical records strengthens the case for a period of heightened seismic activity. Kourion on Cyprus, for example, is known to have been hit then by five strong earthquakes within a period of eighty years, leading to its permanent destruction.

Archeological evidence for the particularly devastating effect of the 365 earthquake is provided by a survey of excavations which document the destruction of most late antique towns and cities in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean around 365.

The Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus described in detail the tsunami that hit Alexandria and other places in the early hours of 21 July 365. His account is particularly noteworthy for clearly distinguishing the three main phases of a tsunami, namely an initial earthquake, the sudden retreat of the sea and an ensuing gigantic wave rolling inland:

> *Slightly after daybreak, and heralded by a thick succession of fiercely shaken thunderbolts, the solidity of the whole earth was made to shake and shudder, and the sea was driven away, its waves were rolled back, and it disappeared, so that the abyss of the depths was uncovered and many-shaped varieties of sea-creatures were seen stuck in the slime; the great wastes of those valleys and mountains, which the very creation had dismissed beneath the vast whirlpools, at that moment, as it was given to be believed, looked up at the sun's rays. Many ships, then, were stranded as if on dry land, and people wandered at will about the paltry remains of the waters to collect fish and the like in their hands; then the roaring sea as if insulted by its repulse rises back in turn, and through the teeming shoals dashed itself violently on islands and extensive tracts of the mainland, and flattened innumerable buildings in towns or wherever they were found. Thus in the raging conflict of the elements, the face of the earth was changed to reveal wondrous sights. For the mass of waters returning when least expected killed many thousands by drowning, and with the tides whipped up to a height as they rushed back, some ships, after the anger of the watery element had grown old, were seen to have sunk, and the bodies of people killed in shipwrecks lay there, faces up or down. Other huge ships, thrust out by the mad blasts, perched on the roofs of houses, as happened at Alexandria, and others were hurled nearly two miles from the shore, like the Laconian vessel near the town of Methone which I saw when I passed by, yawning apart from long decay.*

The tsunami in 365 was so devastating that the anniversary of the disaster was still commemorated annually at the end of the sixth century in Alexandria as a "day of horror".

According to the *Life of Hilarion*, a hagiography, the eponymous saint saved the town of Epidauros in the Adriatic Sea from the waves of the tsunami by raising his hands in the sign of the cross; this has been often taken uncritically as evidence that the tsunami also affected the Adriatic, though there is little evidence for that.

LATER LIFE

When Ursicinus was dismissed from his military post by Constantius, Ammianus too seems to have retired from the military; however, reevaluation of his participation in Julian's Persian campaign has led modern scholarship to suggest that he continued his service but did not for some reason include the period in his history. He accompanied Julian, for whom he expresses enthusiastic admiration, in his campaigns against the Alamanni and the Sassanids. After Julian's death, Ammianus accompanied the retreat of the new emperor, Jovian, as far as Antioch. He was residing in Antioch in 372 when a certain Theodorus was thought to have been identified as the successor to the emperor Valens by divination. Speaking as an alleged eyewitness, Marcellinus recounts how Theodorus and several others were made to confess their deceit through the use of torture, and cruelly punished.

He eventually settled in Rome and began the *Res gestae*. The precise year of his death is unknown, but scholarly consensus places it somewhere between 392 and 400 at the latest.

Modern scholarship generally describes Ammianus as a pagan who was tolerant of Christianity. Marcellinus writes of Christianity as being a "plain and simple" religion that demands only what is just and mild, and when he condemns the actions of Christians, he does not do so based on their Christianity as such. His lifetime was marked by lengthy outbreaks of sectarian and dogmatic strife within the new state-backed faith, often with violent consequences (especially the Arian controversy) and these conflicts sometimes appeared unworthy to him, though it was territory where he could not risk going very far in criticism, due to the growing and volatile political connections between the church and imperial power.

Ammianus was not blind to the faults of Christians or of pagans and was especially critical of them; he commented that "no wild beasts are so hostile to men as Christian sects, in general, are to one another" and he condemns the emperor Julian for excessive attachment to (pagan) sacrifice, and for his edict effectively barring Christians from teaching posts.

WORK

While living in Rome in the 380s, Ammianus wrote a Latin history of the Roman empire from the accession of Nerva (96) to the death of Valens at the Battle of Adrianople (378), in effect writing a continuation of the history of Tacitus. At 22.16.12, he praises the Serapeum of Alexandria in Egypt as the glory of the empire, so his work was presumably completed before the destruction of that building in 391.

The *Res gestae* (*Rerum gestarum libri XXXI*) was originally composed of thirty-one books, but the first thirteen have been lost. The surviving eighteen books, covering the period from 353 to 378, constitute the foundation of modern understanding of the history of the fourth-century Roman Empire. They are lauded as a clear, comprehensive, and generally impartial account of events by a contemporary; like many ancient historians, however, Ammianus was in fact not impartial, although he expresses an intention to be so, and had strong moral and religious prejudices. Although criticized as lacking literary merit by his early biographers, he was in fact quite skilled in rhetoric, which significantly has brought the veracity of some of the *Res gestae* into question.

His work has suffered substantially from manuscript transmission. Aside from the loss of the first thirteen books, the remaining eighteen are in many places corrupt and lacunose. The sole surviving manuscript from which almost every other is derived is a ninth-century Carolingian text, Vatican lat. 1873 (*V*), produced in Fulda from an insular exemplar. The only independent textual source for Ammianus lies in Fragmenta Marbugensia (*M*), another ninth-century Frankish codex which was taken apart to provide covers for account-books during the fifteenth century. Only six leaves of *M* survive; however, before this manuscript was dismantled the Abbot of Hersfeld lent the manuscript to Sigismund Gelenius, who used it in preparing the text of the second Froben edition (*G*). The dates and relationship of V and M were long disputed until 1936 when R. P. Robinson demonstrated persuasively that V was copied from M. As L. D. Reynolds summarizes, "M is thus a fragment of the archetype; symptoms of an insular pre-archetype are evident."

His handling from his earliest printers was little better. The *editio princeps* was printed in 1474 in Rome by Georg Sachsel and Bartholomaeus Golsch, which broke off at the end of Book 26. The next edition (Bologna, 1517) suffered from its editor's conjectures upon the poor text of the 1474 edition; the 1474 edition was pirated for the first Froben edition (Basle, 1518). It was not until 1533 that the last five books of Ammianus' history were put into print by Silvanus Otmar and edited by Mariangelus Accursius. The first modern edition was produced by C.U. Clark (Berlin, 1910–1913). The first English translations were by Philemon Holland in 1609, and later by C.D. Yonge in 1862.

RECEPTION

Edward Gibbon judged Ammianus "an accurate and faithful guide, who composed the history of his own times without indulging the prejudices and passions which usually affect the mind of a contemporary." But he also condemned Ammianus for lack of literary flair: "The coarse and undistinguishing pencil of Ammianus has delineated his bloody figures with tedious and disgusting accuracy." Austrian historian Ernst Stein praised Ammianus as "the greatest literary genius that the world produced between Tacitus and Dante".

According to Kimberly Kagan, his accounts of battles emphasize the experience of the soldiers but at the cost of ignoring the bigger picture. As a result, it is difficult for the reader to understand why the battles he describes had the outcome they did.

Ammianus' work contains a detailed description of the earthquake and tsunami of 365 in Alexandria, which devastated the metropolis and the shores of the eastern Mediterranean on 21 July 365. His report describes accurately the characteristic sequence of earthquake, retreat of the sea, and sudden incoming giant wave.